



## Linguistic Identities in Post-Conflict Societies

Stancombe Taylor, F. (2019). Linguistic Identities in Post-Conflict Societies: Current Issues and Developments in Northern Ireland. *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, 28(2), 86-92.  
<https://doi.org/10.3167/ajec.2019.280208>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

**Published in:**  
Anthropological Journal of European Cultures

**Publication Status:**  
Published (in print/issue): 01/09/2019

**DOI:**  
[10.3167/ajec.2019.280208](https://doi.org/10.3167/ajec.2019.280208)

**Document Version**  
Author Accepted version

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# **Linguistic Identities in Post-Conflict Societies**

## **Current Issues and Developments in Northern Ireland**

Freya Stancombe-Taylor

### **ABSTRACT**

This article assesses the identity politics of language in post-conflict Northern Ireland, where language debates at a political level have been encased in questions of identity. However, despite the continued existence of ethnocentric narratives around language, opportunities have emerged for individuals to cross linguistic barriers and challenge the perspective that certain languages 'belong' to certain communities.

### **KEYWORDS**

Irish, language, Northern Ireland, Postconflict, Ulster-Scots

### **Introduction**

Languages are at the forefront of the current political stalemate in Northern Ireland, a disputed constituent region of the United Kingdom that, at the time of writing, has been without a working regional government for over two years. Stalemates like this, between the largest ethnically aligned parties, frequently relate to identity politics, with questions around language rights proving especially emotive. Language and identity discourses in the region are dominated by social and political contention over public visibility and the Irish language (most often associated with Irish nationalists/Catholics) and another language movement known as Ulster-Scots (more commonly associated with British unionists/Protestants).

These two movements reflect the wider cultural and political disputes between those advocating a unification of the island versus those who value their Britishness and Northern Ireland's continued position in the United Kingdom. This piece, however, argues that although language debates continue to be encased in questions of identity, many individuals, despite the rhetoric of political parties, are crossing linguistic barriers and challenging the perspective that certain languages 'belong' to certain communities. In the case of



Northern Ireland, linguistic identities exemplify the complex nature of identity itself. They are demonstrative of the often abstract and unpredictable reasoning that actors use to compose their multifaceted identities (May 2001). These assertions will be explored in relation to different communities in post-conflict Northern Ireland.

## **Language and Culture in the Context of the Peace Process**

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998 brought an end to that period of intense violence in Northern Ireland, euphemistically termed ‘the Troubles’. Several decades of denominational (and inherently ethnic [Eriksen 2001]) violence from the 1960s resulted in the deaths of approximately 3,500 persons. Despite the cessation of violence and a semblance of peaceful coexistence, linguistic identities remain profoundly fractious, complex and seemingly inseparable from collective memories of conflict (Nic Craith 2003). Indeed, localised political and cultural discourses often imply that only two communities exist – Unionism and Nationalism – and this shapes how we consider languages in the region (McMonagle and McDermott 2014).

Irish and Ulster-Scots, as elements of these segregated ‘cultural infrastructures’ (Nic Craith 2003), have become, for many, symbolically indivisible from the old divisions of the past (McDermott 2012).

At the time of writing, a central point relates to the disputes and political fallout over the potential introduction of an Irish Language Act, which has been a demand of Irish nationalist parties since the peace process began. If implemented, an act would grant specific legislative provisions for Irish and Irish speakers in Northern Ireland. Whilst international bodies such as the Council of Europe have raised concerns about the ‘persisting hostile climate’ surrounding the Irish language, counter-arguments from sections of the unionist population oppose such legislation on the basis that it erodes ‘British identity’. This current situation illustrates how expressions and endorsements of linguistic identities are often another symbolic battlefield in Northern Ireland’s ongoing ethnocultural conflicts (Nic Craith 2003).

## **Beyond a ‘Two Traditions’ Model of Language**

Indicative of the acute nature of past divisions in Northern Ireland, stabilisation of intergroup relations has perhaps not been aided by

decades of academic literature and subsequent policy papers purporting a 'two-traditions' model. This model can be characterised as summarising the entire population of Northern Ireland as neatly falling within the brackets of either unionist/Protestant or nationalist/Catholic. A key question, then, relates to the deconstruction of these binary notions of linguistic identities.

The first phenomenon of interest relates to Protestant learners of the Irish language. Throughout the Troubles, the Irish language had been considered to be oppositional to Protestant/British identity because of the connections between the language and Irish political nationalism. However, small numbers of Protestants have traditionally engaged with the language. Perhaps the most fruitful research deconstructing the untenable 'dual-community' model and examining interrelationships of Irish-language learning and Protestant identities are observable in McCoy's (1997) work. His interviews with Protestant Irish-language learners in Northern Ireland, as early as the 1990s, humanises and individualises their compounded and multilevelled identity constructions. Participant discourses richly describe the barriers and prejudice they faced due to their decision to learn Irish and the ways in which they resolved the societally prescribed incongruences of managing an identity that was both Protestant and Irish-speaking. Moreover, McCoy's work clearly disputes the political elites' wider narrative that communities should not engage with or learn the language of the 'other'. Similarly, Wright and McGrory's (2005) investigation of the motivations of Irish-language learners notes that the Irish language has been concealed from the Ulster Protestant community, a 'hidden heritage' that in fact belongs to all of Northern Ireland's population.

More recently, this trend of Protestant engagement with the Irish language has gathered more momentum, as illustrated through the work of the *Turas* project (*turas* means 'journey' in Irish), a community-based initiative. The *Turas* initiative is an example of a reconciliation project that advocates more complex interpretations of Irish by providing classes for Protestants wishing to learn the language. The project, with its headquarters in a predominantly Unionist area of Belfast, was established by community activist Linda Ervine, who publicly heralds her own Unionist identity and background. She promotes the idea that Protestants share an emotional and cultural affinity to the island of Ireland that includes the language, but that this in no way need erode their political affiliation as British unionist. Ervine teaches Irish classes and Scottish Gaelic cultural classes and holds various

events marketed towards the local Unionist community. The focus on Scottish Gaelic (which belongs to the same language family as Irish) is important for unionist learners because it encourages the existence of a wider British community of Gaelic speakers. Mitchell and Miller (2019) assert that the project is promising for ongoing reconciliation processes, as not only does it allow for a 'revision of narrow or destructive' narratives of language and history, but it also fosters empathy for other linguistic communities and reframes the territoriality of identity constructions.

A requirement for interlinguistic respect is similarly highlighted in Stapleton and Wilson's research (2004) on Ulster-Scots identities. Ulster-Scots, as a community movement, came to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s and has been most associated with rural Protestant communities in the northeast corner of Northern Ireland. Advocates of Ulster-Scots consider it a form of speech brought to the region during the plantations of the seventeenth century (many 'planters' came from Scotland) and continues to be used today. For others, the movement is considered a politicised regional dialect of English or as a 'unionist answer to Irish' (Nic Craith 2003). These perspectives, however, fail to acknowledge the real-life impact on members of the Ulster-Scots movement. Stapleton and Wilson, in their ethnographic work, found that Ulster-Scots plays a far more complex role in identity constructions and the symbolic interactions of everyday life than many detractors acknowledge (Stapleton and Wilson 2004).

The *Turas* project, along with the sentiments expressed by Stapleton and Wilson's (2004) research participants, mirror a particular paradigm shift in some literature on Northern Ireland as well as in certain debates concerning regional and cultural policy. This shift sees tentative discussions built on ideas of cohesion and a 'shared future', including notions of reframed identities. These are positive advancements in the sustainment of peace and the dismantling of binary linguistic identities. However, it can also be argued that peace initiatives that encourage 'cross-community' interaction and diversified linguistic affiliations are still rooted in the starting point of a Northern Ireland segregated along Protestant and Catholic lines (McMonagle and McDermott 2014). While the extant research on Protestant learners of the Irish language cannot, then, be held up as unquestionable evidence of an overall move towards the tolerant treatment of linguistic identities in Northern Ireland, it should still be regarded as a viable and meaningful step towards such objectives.

## Diversifying the Language Debate

Questions around minority languages in Northern Ireland have, as noted in this paper, typically centred on Irish and Ulster-Scots (McMonagle and McDermott 2014). However, other authors have consistently highlighted the exclusion of Northern Ireland's migrant linguistic identities (McDermott 2011, 2012). Indeed, the 2011 census data showed that approximately 4.5 per cent of Northern Ireland's population was born outside the UK and Ireland.

If a primary objective in deconstructing the 'two-traditions' model is to understand more heterogeneous, multifaceted and interethnic identities, then the continued exclusion of the many other languages of Northern Ireland from policy debates will prove to be a stumbling point in the realisation of this goal. McMonagle and McDermott (2014) have drawn attention to how ethnically aligned political elites have in fact exploited migrant language identities as a means of furthering their own agendas. As an example, comments made by Arlene Foster, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, in 2017 sparked outrage when she suggested that there would be more justification for a Polish Language Act than an Irish Language Act due to the relative number of speakers in the region. Through comments such as these, migrant languages are weaponised while actual consideration of the needs of their users are largely absent.

This is not to say that there has been no progress in this regard. The celebration and promotion of multiethnic and multicultural content in Northern Ireland's civic and public spaces, although facing many hurdles, is progressing to some extent, which has relevance for speakers of migrant languages. The renegotiation of public space as 'multicultural' space has been a particular focus of peace process initiatives. Cultural events, such as the 2013 UK City of Culture in Derry, have utilised apolitical and neutral narratives of history, art, language, music and culture (McDermott, Nic Craith and Strani 2016). Whilst McDermott and colleagues (2016) recognise the influence of economic incentivisation in presenting a 'shared' narrative, they describe the positive elements of the renegotiation of urban space as an integral step towards continued peace, which is relevant for multilingual speakers.

In 2017, the Northwest Migrants Forum held an event in central Derry to welcome Syrian refugees to Northern Ireland. The event, which encouraged involvement of all the migrant and host population, is another example of the diversification and reimagination of public

space. Such events and presentations of ethnic and cultural diversity permit the furtherance of rich and multifaceted linguistic identity constructions in social and public spheres. As stated by McDermott (2012: 202), ‘projects which have no initial linguistic objectives often have an impact on language issues’ as they create safe and neutral spaces for multilingual speakers to use the language of their choice. In such cases, the recognition of diversity and linguistic heterogeneity justifies the experiences and rights of Northern Ireland’s increasingly multiethnic populace whilst still acknowledging the intercommunal differences of the host population.

Moreover, there are also other linguistic minorities in the region that have received little attention. For example, the Northern Ireland Deaf community uses Irish Sign Language (ISL), British Sign Language (BSL) and Northern Ireland Sign Language (NISL). Notably, these sections of the multilingual population were not included in the stipulations of the 1998 Agreement. Even less focus has been drawn to the language of the Traveller community, Cant (also referred to as Shelta or Gammon). The Traveller community is a nomadic ethnic group that has distinct cultural, social and religious practices and has been the subject of prejudice and exclusion across the island of Ireland for decades (Helleiner 2000). Whilst there is visibility of advocacy for the protection of Irish and Ulster-Scots in the public space, Cant and Sign Languages are marginalised from academic and public conversations about autochthonous languages. Whilst the Republic of Ireland recently instated the Irish Sign Language Act (2017), the British Deaf Association are ‘disappointed with the lack of progress’ relating to the protections of deaf identities in Northern Ireland. Similarly, resources for Travellers situated in Northern Ireland are lacking. Information about Cant is sparse, and this is perhaps a reflection of evidence, linguistic protections aside, that basic human and cultural rights are still not afforded to the Traveller community in Northern Ireland.

## Conclusion

To conclude, substantial steps are required to increase protections and visibility of the autochthonous linguistic identities of deaf and Traveller persons in Northern Ireland, and more inclusive developments are necessary for migrant identities in wider linguistic and legislative actions (McMonagle and McDermott 2014). The monopolisation of language identity discourses by Irish and Ulster-Scots in

Northern Ireland has minimised potential growth for multicultural and multilingual reinterpretations of the region's linguistic spaces and complex identities. A summary of this forum piece, however, incites appreciation of ongoing efforts to expand and transform linguistic identities that have previously been rooted in ethnocultural division. As stated by Nic Craith (2003: 199), 'although the concept of two communities is entrenched in Northern Irish society, there is an increasing recognition that society is hardly that uncomplicated'.

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